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'STORM CENTER' COURSE

Forthcoming Drama Followed Rugged Trail Before Reaching the Screen

By DANIEL TARADASH

The writer is making his directorial debut with "Storm Center" which arrives at the Normandie Theatre on Saturday.

HOLLYWOOD.

As the director and co-author of the motion picture "Storm Center," I can hardly claim to be a fair assessor of its merits. But I can say, with no modesty at all, that I believe one aspect of it deserves to be called "great." The great thing about it is that it was made.

For by all rules and rotes, by all traditions and precedents, by all normal Hollywood values, the story and screen play which Elick Moll and I wrote well over five years ago shouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't and daren't be made.

"Storm Center" is a dangerous picture about dangerous ideas. It is about the burning of books and the assassination of character. It is about gossip and its peculiar and particular impact on children. It is about faith in the headlines and distrust of the intellectual. It is about political ambition disguised as patriotism. It is about the unpredictable line of cause and effect which can start with the banning of a book and end with the creation of a lunatic. And on the positive side, it is about a person who believes the best way to serve one's country is to be loyal to its own traditions rather than afraid of another's propaganda.

Blueprint

That such ideas might deserve a viewing, that they might serve as the basis for warm and stirring drama is beside the point. You just don't make movies about them.

Only once in a while, say a lifetime, you do. You do this first by selling your idea to one of the very few producers who thinks such a picture ought to be made. You do it by camouflaging it with an innocuous title and never revealing its subject-matter through the long months you work on the story and screen play. You do it by having one of the great actresses and personalities of the industry's history accept it as her "return to the screen." You do it by hanging on after the lady walks out, by not acceding to the cold fact that the film has been refrigerated time and again.

Genesis

The idea for a story about book-burning and guilt by association was only as far away as any front page in the fall of 1950. We thought there was material here for an exciting and different film, one in which we could say something we felt deeply about our country—an opportunity which screen-writers rarely have. Unfortunately, we feared nobody would buy it or make it. Yet there were two—if perhaps only two—producers in Hollywood we might shoot through the heart: Stanley Kramer and Julian Blaustein. We took dead aim and got them both.

Blaustein, a very old friend of mine (we had gone to college together), was a producer at Twentieth Century - Fox. He went to the front office and raved about our idea; and was told he was raving and respectfully turned down. Kramer, on the other hand, had an independent company and could make what he pleased under his releasing deal with Columbia. However, he recognized the politically explosive aspects of our material and we all decided that secrecy was the better part of valor. We dubbed the story "The Library," not being able to think of a duller or less controversial label. We refused to tell anyone what we were working on as we wrote the screen play.

One memorable afternoon we took the finished script to a house on a hill and I read it to Mary Pickford. Her enthusiasm bordered on the ecstatic as she agreed to play the central role of Alicia Hull.

Setbacks

Kramer selected a talented and sensitive director, Irving Reis, to guide the film, and shooting was scheduled for the summer of 1952. At the last moment, the picture was postponed.

But Kramer is a stubborn and courageous man and in the fall production started again. This time we were really under way. Miss Pickford made tests, her costumes were designed, sets were built, actors signed. And Miss Pickford arrived at the first day's rehearsal—to make her first film in nineteen years—promptly at 9 A.M. She didn't arrive the second day at all. For reasons and emotions which must remain her own, she quit. The film was off again.

Kramer remained undaunted. He set about to find another star and signed Barbara Stanwyck for the role. A new starting date was set. The film was on again.

But not for long. Kramer and Columbia had reached an impasse on many things and now decided to part company. Once again "The Library" went into the icebox. And the misadventures that had beset the venture reached a sad climax in the summer of 1953, when Irving Reis died.

A year passed. By then I had written the screen play of "From Here to Eternity" and was working on the film adaptation of "Picnic." Both were Columbia pictures and I was persona grata at the studio. And then, most unexpectedly, President Eisenhower went to Dartmouth and spoke out against book burning. I bustled to Columbia executives, questioned them on the status of "The Lib-

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rary" and learned that it, along with other unproduced Kramer scripts, now belonged to the studio. I suggested that the temperature of the times had changed. I proclaimed it a civic duty to make the picture. I even went so far as to insist it would make money. I dropped a quotation from "Measure For Measure" on their desks; it read: "Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt."

Green Light

Early in 1955, Julian Blaustein and I formed the Phoenix Corporation and made a producing-releasing deal with Columbia. Through the years, Blaustein had never lost his own desire to make "The Library." Now he took the screen play to Bette Davis. She not only would do it but said she *had* to do it. Blaustein and I went to Harry Cohn, the president of Columbia, and offered to make the picture for nothing, waiving the kind of guaranteed fee we were to receive on other films, and gambling on the possibility of profits. The next day he told us to go ahead.

"Storm Center" (the final title of "The Library") was shot almost entirely in Santa Rosa, Calif., a small town fifty miles north of San Francisco. In the adjacent county, Marin, a self-appointed censor, was vigorously conducting a book-banning campaign. She wrote Bette Davis, warning her about the questionable nature of our picture, reminding her of her children, and advising her to walk out of the film. Bette Davis replied that she believed her children would always be proud of her for doing "Storm Center."

I believe mine will, too.